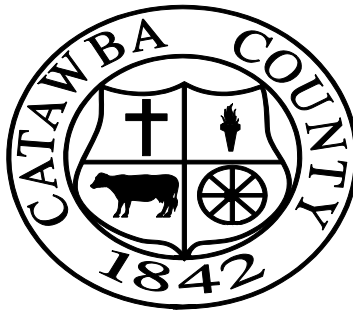


CATAWBA COUNTY WORK FIRST PLAN



October 2005-September 2007

Submitted: November 1, 2004
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I. Conditions within the County

- Less than 1% (.246%) of the population in Catawba County received Work First. (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/37/37035.html>)
- There were 362 families receiving Work First in September 2004 in Catawba County. Of these 201 include no adult in the assistance payment and 161 include one or two adults with a child or children.
- The racial heritage of families receiving Work First is 57% Caucasian, 37% African-American, 3% Asian, 2% Hispanic, and 1% Other.
- Approximately 66.5% of the children in the Work First caseload have a valid child support order. The average child support is \$123.00 per month. However, the collection rate for Work First families is 34.4%.
- 56% of Catawba County's Work First cases include only one child.
- Over half of Catawba County's Work First cases (56%) receive assistance six months or less.
- Work First recipients face many barriers to employment, which includes: medical problems that preclude or limit their employment and serious mental or psychological problems.
- Transportation is another major barrier. Even if the family has a car, the car is often in poor repair.

Catawba County's labor force in August was 73,370 with an unemployment rate of 6.7% and the State's rate was 5.0% (www.ncesc.com). During the last several years, Catawba County has seen a steady increase in layoffs and business closings. Catawba County historically has been characterized by its dependency on manufacturing. Fifty percent of those employed in the county have a connection to manufacturing with plants that produce much of the nation's furniture, textiles, and fiber optics. Many of these manufacturing plants have seen a slow down with the recession resulting in layoffs, shortened workweeks and plant closings. In the past several years, many manufacturing jobs previously held by Catawba County citizens have gone to developing counties where employees at significantly lower wages can do the work. The lost of manufacturing jobs are being replaced with service jobs that pay less. The ranks of the 'working poor' in Catawba County are swelling. 9.1% of Catawba County citizens are living in poverty.

Majority of the available jobs are in the service industries and involve night and weekend work, as well as rotating shifts/days. This type of scheduling makes childcare and transportation very difficult to coordinate. No centers are currently offering second or third shift care. Ten licensed homes are providing second shift care and twelve licensed homes are providing third shift care. Weekend care has proven to be a hardship on the licensed homes and acceptance of children has transitioned to a case-by-case process. Helping families locate safe and affordable childcare to meet the needs of irregular work schedules is imperative to the continued success of the program.

While it is well known that North Carolina has one of the largest percentages of working women in the nation. Approximately, 46% of the county's workforce are women.

The bulk of employment growth will be in the following areas:

- Healthcare Services
- Retail Trade
- Business services, including temporary help supply services, computer and data processing services, and general service areas
- Homeland Security and Law Enforcement
- Education

The number of job orders listed with Hickory Employment Security Commission totaled 279 in August 2004 compared to 300 in August 2002.

Public transportation is not available throughout the county. No public transportation is available outside of the extended workday (Monday through Friday 6:15 a.m. to 6:18 p.m. and on Saturday 7:45 a.m. to 4:12 p.m.). Buses do not run on Sundays. Many areas of the county are miles from the nearest employer or childcare center. For these families, the lack of transportation is a major barrier to self-sufficiency. Public transportation needs to become more flexible to meet the needs of this population.

Mission Statement

To enable Work First recipients and applicants to become and remain self-sufficient by linking them with resources and skills, and to allow them to take responsibility for themselves and their families.

Vision Statement

All Catawba County families will demonstrate personal responsibility and will have the resources needed to meet their basic needs – food, clothing, shelter, and medical care.

II. The Planning Process

A. Planning Committee

The Board of County Commissioners appointed a local committee consisting of thirty-four members. The members of the planning committee and the groups they represent are:

- Susan Witherspoon -- Public Health Board Member
- Glenn Barger -- Social Service Board and Commissioner Member
- Crystal Leathers -- Mental Health Board Member (LME)
- Ed Gurley -- Newton-Conover School Board Member
- Melissa Cline -- Local Management Entity for Mental Health
- Donna Trado -- HRD Director, Catawba Valley Community College
- Ron Valentini -- JobLink and Dean of Continuing Education (CVCC)
- Glennie Daniels -- NC Cooperative Extension Services
- Barbara Degen -- Legal Aid of North Carolina
- Cynthia McGinnis -- Piedmont Wagon
- Susan Parrish -- Childcare Supervisor
- Diane Thompson -- Child Support Supervisor
- Laurie George -- Family Guidance Center
- Henry Steele -- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Lori Hughes -- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Lynda Gross -- Goodwill Industries
- Allan Mackie -- Employment Security Commission
- Gloria DeVane -- Employment Security Commission
- Joy Mease -- Social Security Administration
- Renee Morgan -- Family N.E.T. (QSAP)
- Patricia Meredith -- Family N.E.T.
- Pete Miller -- Business / Workforce Development Board Representative
- Amy Herman -- Prevention Unit Supervisor
- Cyndy Benson -- Child Welfare Program Manager
- Kathy Clay -- Cognitive Connection
- Sandy Gregory -- Greater Hickory Cooperative Christian Ministry
- Via Burgins -- Work First
- Susan Starnes -- Work First
- Diann Slaughter -- Work First
- Bobby Boyd -- Social Service Director
- Karen Heffner -- Work First Program Manager
- Deanna Singleton -- Work First Supervisor
- Beth Smith -- Work First Supervisor
- Jo Sloan -- Family Support Division Administrator

B. Public Comment

The plan was made available for public review from October 11 through October 15, 2004. An article in the local newspaper, Hickory Daily Record informed citizens that copies of the plan

were at the Catawba County Main Library and Hickory City Libraries (Patrick Beaver and Ridgeview). A copy was made available to citizens at the Social Services office and at the JobLink Career Center. A copy was placed on the Catawba County web page. Accepting the input from local citizens and with the recommendation of the planning committee, the plan was formally approved by the Catawba County Board of Commissioners.

C. Planning Process

On October 4, 2004, the Planning Committee meeting was held. At this meeting, local Social Service staff gave the committee members an overview of the current Work First Program. Demographic information on the current Work First population was shared with the group, as well as condition in the county. A time line was developed for the project.

Prior to the committee meeting all 362 Catawba County Work First families were surveyed by mail. The survey asked:

- What barriers are keeping you from becoming employed?
- What do you need in order to become employed?
- What services do you currently use from Social Services?
- What would you change about the Work First Program?
- What benefits/services of the Work First Program have helped you?
- If employed, what has helped you in keeping your job?
- Any other comments?

To encourage participation in the survey, a slip was included in the participant's envelope, which allowed them to enter a drawing for movie tickets. Approximately 20% of the surveys were returned.

Survey Results:

Barriers to Employment

From the surveys, several issues were communicated frequently and emphatically. Health issues, training, and transportation problems remain the biggest barriers to employment.

This survey was also sent to Catawba County's child only case participants. A number of them commented that their lack of legal status (non-documented alien) and lack of Social Security Card prevented them from getting employment. These families frequently mentioned language as another barrier to employment.

Services being provided

On a positive note, many families noted that they were working or in training for employment as a result of supportive services being provided by the Agency. As might be expected, Childcare, Food Stamps, Medicaid, and Transportation were highlighted as very important.

Ideas for Change

Families asked for an increase in the cash payment, the opportunity for more training/education, more flexibility in the required number of hours per week and yearly reviews instead of every 6 months.

The plan was developed following suggestions provided by the initial program guidelines, federal requirements, and local input. Each participant had a direct influence over the preparation of the proposal through contribution of data and information.

Catawba County's demonstrated record of commitment to children and families, collaborative strategic planning, risk taking and successful implementation of innovations makes this community a natural choice for Electing county status. The successful track record includes efforts such as Catawba County TANF Housing Initiative, Work and Ride, Smart Start, JobLink Career Center, and Multiple Response System (Child Welfare Reform). Catawba County used the many lessons learned from previous efforts to design this project for families in need.

The Planning Committee developed a common vision for the plan based on a philosophy of respect for the worth and dignity of each individual in this community. Each individual has the right to self-determination, but is expected to be a contributing, self-supporting member of this community. A system of supporting services and programs should be in place to encourage, motivate and empower individuals to move from dependency to self-sufficiency.

The welfare reform is a work in progress. The Board of County Commissioners and Social Services will continue to monitor and evaluate the impact of the Work First Program on children and families in Catawba County and to recommend adjustments and refinements to the collaborative effort as needed. Members of the committee have pledged their support of the proposal and its implementation.

III. Outcomes and Goals for the County

The goal of the Catawba County Work First Program is to move Work First applicants and recipients to self-sufficiency by either enabling them to secure and maintain employment or by securing disability benefits.

A. Statewide Work First Goals

Catawba County will adopt the goals established by the state for Catawba County. Those goals are expected to be:

1. **Employment:** Self-sufficiency will be realized primarily through the employment of Work First citizens. 99 Catawba County Work First participants will go to work.
2. **Meeting Federal Participation Rate:** Active participation in federal countable work activities will lead to full time employment. Catawba County will maintain an “All Family” Participation Rate of 50% in accordance with the Federal law.
3. **Providing Employment Services:** Active participation in intensive employment services for all families is necessary in order to meet the participation rate and to ensure families are served adequately before the end of five years. One measure of success in Work First is the percentage of families who are subject to the work requirement that counties are assisting with job preparation and job placement. Catawba County will maintain a 80% of the “All Parent” and 100% of “Two Parent” receiving employment services.
4. **Benefit Diversion:** The most successful outcome possible is for an applicant to avoid the need to become a recipient. Catawba County will enable 218 families to avoid welfare through Diversion Assistance.
5. **Staying off Welfare:** Efforts to reduce welfare rolls help adults find jobs, and increase self-sufficiency are undermined when families return to welfare. Families leaving Work First because of a job are tracked to determine if they return to cash assistance. 90% of Catawba County Work First customers who leave Work First due to employment will remain off of assistance for one year.
6. **Job Retention:** Families who leave Work First for employment and continue to be employed 6 to 12 months after leaving the program show evidence of keeping their income and increased job stability, which impacts a family’s well-being. This measure will be based on the number of responsible adults that leave Work First Family Assistance for employment who are still employed at 6 and 12-month intervals following termination. 60% of Catawba County Work First customers who leave Work First due to employment will still be employed at the six-month interval and 50% will still be employed at the twelve-month interval.

B. County Developed Outcome Goals

1. **Customer Service:** 98% of Work First applicants and/or recipients will have a positive rating, which will be measured by a random sample customer satisfaction survey administered throughout the biennial years.

2. **Shared Cases:** 100% of shared cases (Work First cases that are also involved with Child Welfare) to be known to both workers and the workers to work in agreement as plans for the family are developed.

IV. Plans to Achieve the Outcomes and Goals

Statewide Goals

- A. **Activities:** Work is the focus of the Work First Program. On the day of the application, the case manager begins laying the foundation and ground rules for this program. The citizen is informed that Work First Cash Assistance is considered short-term assistance and full time employment is the goal of the program. Employment services are offered to all able-bodied adults. Case managers will provide Work First citizens with the full array of services, including developing appropriate Mutual Responsibility Agreements and closely monitoring progress as the citizen moves towards self-sufficiency. Case managers will place all mandatory participants in appropriate countable Work First activities such as Employment, Vocational Education Training, Work Experience, Job Search/Job Readiness, etc. All cases will be staffed with the supervisor at a minimum of once per month. Case managers will also make referrals to community resources. Sanction will be imposed when the participant is out of compliance with his/her Mutual Responsibility Agreement. The SUCCESS Team will be utilized for all cases that have 30 or more months used on their lifetime limit and/or coded as incapacitated or needed in the home. The case manager will provide case management, counseling and problem solving services.
- B. **Supportive Services:** Childcare, transportation, participation expenses (mileage reimbursement, car repairs, uniforms, tuition and book, etc.) child support, food stamps, and Medicaid benefits.

Local Goals

- A. **Activities:** All applicants and recipients will be informed of all rights and responsibilities, and all aspects of the program. Staff will 'treat' the applicants and recipients as they would a family member. Work First case managers will check the MCI (Master Client Index) to see if the family is open to Child Welfare. If so, they will inform the Child Welfare worker that the case is open to Work First and work closely to coordinate services.
- B. **Supportive Services:** Case managers will be available to assist citizens in whatever way possible.

V. Administration

A. Authority for administration of the Work First Plan

The Catawba County Board of County Commissioners retains full authority for the Work First Program.

B. Organization Structure

Catawba County Social Services is responsible for administration of the Work First Program. The Work First Program is currently under the supervision of a Program Manager and two Supervisors who are responsible for assuring that the ten Work First Case Managers carry out the mandates of this program. From the moment the citizen makes first contact with the Agency, he/she is informed that the Work First Program is a temporary assistance program and the goal for each citizen is full time employment and self-sufficiency. The workers in this unit are blended doing both eligibility and employment functions. The Work First case manager is responsible for approximately 45 on-going and 15 retention cases, as well as being on intake twice a week.

Catawba County's organizational structure changed July 1, 1998 to better implement Welfare Reform. A successful Work First Program required this appreciable organizational cultural change and intense involvement with the business, faith, sister agencies, and community to move citizens to and maintain them in independence. The supervisor/employee ratio improvement has allowed the appropriate attention to be given to each citizen and family situation.

Co-located with the Work First unit is a Job Placement Counselor from the Employment Security Commission who provides services to Work First participants. A contract with Employment Security Commission has existed since 1989 and has proven highly successful. The Qualified Substance Abuse Professional (QSAP) is also co-located with the Work First unit. Catawba County's JobLink Career Center is located on the campus of Catawba Valley Community College. This is another viable resource to aid citizens in their search for training and employment.

Emergency Assistance is offered to customers per policy. The Services Intake Workers assess citizens and if appropriate TANF emergency assistance funds are used.

C. First Stop

A contract has existed between Social Services and Employment Security Commission since 1989 for the services of a Job Placement Counselor who is located on-site at Social Services. It is a performance-based contract. The Job Placement Counselor is expected to comply with all of the First Stop Policy, as well as ensure 135 Work First citizens become employed as a result of her/his intervention during the state fiscal year 2004-2005. A copy of the Memorandum of Understanding (contract) is attached.

Child Care

Catawba County Social Services has a formal policy, which prioritizes children to be served by the Child Day Care Program. The Social Services Board approved this policy on April 17, 2002. The priority for the day care funding is:

1. Child Protective Services
2. Employment or Training leading to employment
 - Foster Parents (full or part-time employment/training)
 - Work First participants (full or part-time employment/training)
 - Full Time Employment/Training (general population)
3. Education
 - Teen parent in High School
 - Full time Post Secondary education
 - Full time Vocational, Skills training, GED, ABE, ESL
4. Child Welfare Service
5. Part time employment
6. Developmental needs

Catawba County clearly recognizes that Childcare can be a primary support service for many of the families receiving Work First. The Catawba County Partnership for Children has allocated Social Services \$1.6 million for childcare subsidy for fiscal year 2004-05. Currently, Smart Start funds, combined with state and federal dollars total over \$7.1 million for subsidy for low income families, Work First families involved in training efforts and families moving from welfare to work. As demonstrated above, priority for use of childcare funding is given to families moving from welfare to work.

Quick Care, which began in January 1998, assists Work First families with an immediate need for childcare. The Work First families are seen immediately upon becoming employed and are given a voucher based on their declaration of income if verification cannot be obtained before the family is scheduled to begin work. The family is given ten days to provide verification of income. This enables the Work First family to secure childcare immediately, which allows the family to accept the employment offer.

E. Transportation

With approximately 40% of Catawba County's Work First families not owning a car, transportation becomes a critical barrier to employment. Approximately \$120,000 from the Work First Block Grant/MOE will be allocated for transportation services. Strategies developed include:

1. Public Transportation: Implement more flexible routing and possible expansion of routes
2. Taxi Transportation: Contract with a local taxi company to transport participants to and from their assigned employment activities. This service is used only after all other transportation options have been eliminated.
3. Assessing recipients' vehicles: There are several auto mechanics in the area that are willing to assess the worth of a recipient's car to determine if it is logical for Work First to assist with the cost of car repairs. One of the criteria for using Work First

funds to repair a recipient's car is that there is a reasonable assurance that the repair will result in the car being and staying operational.

4. Car donation: The Work and Ride Program accepts vehicles – cars, trucks, and vans – in road worthy condition and matches them with families in Catawba County who need transportation to maintain their employment. Work and Ride is a partnership of Catawba County Social Services, Cooperative Christian Ministry, and the Faith Community Task Force on Poverty. Since the inception of the Work and Ride program in May 1999, 87 vehicles have been awarded to families struggling for economic independence.
5. Transportation for former Work First recipients: A maximum of four months transportation assistance is provided for all Work First citizens for any required employment related activities. When a Work First citizen goes off of assistance and is working, transportation assistance will continue until they have reached their four-month maximum. During this time, case managers are counseling the participant and encouraging them to locate alternative forms of transportation.

F. Substance Abuse

Per estimates from Family N.E.T., approximately 7.5% of the Work First caseload may have serious problems with Substance Abuse and another 5% may have other mental health issues. It can be anticipated that many of the Work First citizens with substance abuse and mental health problems will have difficulty meeting the conditions established in their Mutual Responsibility Agreement.

Work First and Family N.E.T. have committed to work together in order to craft a plan that addresses local community needs. As a part of the Work First – Substance Abuse Initiative, Family N.E.T. provides one FTE Qualified Substance Abuse Professional (QSAP), stationed on site at Social Services, to conduct initial substance abuse screenings and assessments designated exclusively to serve the Work First population. The QSAP screens and makes appropriate referrals of other mental health issues. Substance abuse services provided by this program include, but are not limited to the following:

1. Substance Abuse Screenings: All persons applying for the Work First program will be given an initial substance abuse screening by the QSAP. If the results of this screening detect a possible substance abuse problem, the QSAP will conduct a complete assessment.
2. Substance Abuse Assessments: During the scheduled appointment time, the QSAP will conduct a substance abuse assessment to take place on site at Social Services. The substance abuse assessment will include an in-depth clinical interview and the use of a statewide-approved assessment tool, the SUDDS IV.
3. Treatment Planning and Referral to Treatment Services: When the QSAP identifies a Work First citizen as having a substance abuse problem, the QSAP begins the treatment planning process with the identified person. The QSAP and the participant develop a Mutual Responsibility Agreement addressing these issues and the participant is immediately referred to Family N.E.T. or other appropriate provider. Throughout the treatment process, Work First participants will be randomly drug tested as part of the treatment plan.

4. Case Management: The QSAP stationed at Social Services provides ongoing care coordination, including tracking of progress for Work First citizens. Work First participants who fail to participate in recommend substance abuse treatment services will be sanctioned.

G. Family Violence Option

Violence in the family maybe a substantial barrier to self-sufficiency for many families. Catawba County, recognizing the impact that violence can have on families, has entered into a contract with Family Guidance to provide an in-depth assessment when appropriate. The purpose of the assessment is to evaluate the citizen's situation and to determine services needed, as well as the extent to which the violence is an impediment to self-sufficiency. Family Guidance will provide the following services:

1. Individualized assessments for each participant referred by the Work First case manager. Based on the assessment, the participant may receive ongoing counseling, psychological testing, and/or supportive services.
2. Case consultation with the Work First case manager.

Catawba County Social Services Work First unit and Family Guidance agree to closely coordinate activities in order to assure a coordinated plan and no duplication of services.

If a participant is unable to participate in work activities or comply with other Work First requirements at the time of assessment, the participant may request a waiver. The Work First case manager will use the assessment report from Family Guidance in conjunction with other information concerning the case, to determine if a waiver should be granted and for how long. A waiver may not be appropriate if the participant is able to meet the Work First requirements without endangering the participant or the children.

Catawba County Social Services also contracts with Family Guidance to coordinate and/or provide Domestic Violence Emergency Services for TANF eligible citizens.

H. Maintenance Effort

The following activities, staff, and services will be funded using Maintenance of Effort (MOE) funds:

1. Work First Staff
2. TANF Fraud Investigative Staff
3. Work First Participant Expenses
4. Work First Child/Adult Care
5. Work First Transportation Expenses
6. Work First Education/Training
7. Retention Services
8. Enrichment Services
9. Group Support
10. Contracts (Cognitive Skills Training, Legal Aid, and Job Recruitment/Assistance)
11. Work First Cash – Emergency Assistance
12. Others as needed

I. Child Welfare Services

50% of the Work First Block Grant will be devoted to Child Welfare Services in both fiscal years 2005-06 and 2006-07.

VI. Emergency Assistance

Catawba County will continue to address the emergency needs of families with a combination of resources. Three non-profit assistance agencies have a long history of serving the needs of families in crisis: the Salvation Army, the Cooperative Christian Ministry (Hickory Area), and the Eastern Cooperative Christian Ministry (serving the Eastern end of the county). A number of smaller programs and agencies also serve families in need including: the Red Cross, the Christian Community Outreach Ministries, and Family Care Center. Many area churches maintain crisis funds for families in needs, in addition to supporting the efforts of the above-reference Faith-based ministries.

Catawba County Social Services will continue to appropriate a portion of its TANF allocation to the Emergency Assistance Program.

To be eligible for Emergency Assistance, the family must:

1. Have a child that meets the Work First Assistance guidelines in the home who is related to the specified relative or be preparing for the return of a child (i.e. child being returned to home from foster care) within the next 60 days or be the legal custodian or guardian for a minor child in their case.
2. Be a US citizen or an eligible alien and a resident of Catawba County.
3. Be in an emergency situation caused by circumstances beyond the control of the family (loss or significant decrease in income, fire, unusual medical expenses that have left the family unable to meet their normal living expenses, etc.).
4. Have a total countable reserve equal or below \$2200. Liquid assets are limited to \$300. Vehicles are not counted in reserve. Liquid assets are cash on hand, current savings account balance, checking account balance (except what is needed to pay current bills), stocks, bonds, mutual fund shares, savings certificates and revocable trust funds.
5. Have a monthly total countable income equal to or below 200% of the federal poverty level. All income, other than the WFFA check will counted. Use a base period of the month prior to the month of application. Convert income to a monthly amount (by using conversion factors of 4.3, 2.15). Add together the countable earned and unearned income. Compare to the income chart to determine if income eligible.
6. Cannot have received TANF EA within the past twelve months.
7. Is eligible for a 30-day period, once approved. Payments may not exceed \$300 in a 30-day period. Benefits may not be provided under TANF EA more than one time in a twelve month period.

The definition for specified relative is taken from the Kinship rule as written in the Work First Manual. A specified relative is:

- A parent: this includes the natural mother or father, legal father, or adoptive parent(s) after issuance of the final order. Note: A parent's blood relationship remains intact even after a child's adoption to another family. Therefore, the natural parent or other natural relative listed below may meet the kinship rule even after the child has been adopted into another family.

- An alleged father or other alleged paternal relative.
- A blood or half blood relative or adoptive relative limited to: brother, sister, grandparent, great-grandparent, uncle or aunt, great-uncle or aunt, great-great uncle or aunt, nephew, niece, first cousin or first cousin once removed.
- A step-relative is limited to: stepparent, stepbrother, and stepsister.
- Spouses of anyone in the above groups, even after the marriage has been terminated by death or divorce.

The Agency Must:

- Make a decision to approve or deny the TANF EA application within five workdays from the date of the application.

Evaluation of Emergencies:

- TANF EA cannot be used to improve the family's standard of living.
- Explore whether any member of the family will have income that can be used to meet the emergency. (Will they get paid again before the power bill is due?)
- Explore with them the steps they have taken to alleviate the emergency.
- Evaluate whether or not the family has experienced a sudden change that has led to a decrease in income or created an extra expense.
- Evaluate to determine if they caused their own emergency. Do they have a history of being in a crisis situation? If so, explore other options.
- Determine if TANF EA will prevent recurrence of the emergency. Will they be able to maintain on an ongoing basis if we alleviate this emergency or will they have the same problem next month?
- If the family has been penalized for failure to comply with WFFA program requirements, and the emergency could have been prevented had they complied, deny the TANF EA application.
- Heating and cooling crisis: CIP monies must be used first. If there are no CIP monies, TANF EA funds can be used to alleviate the crisis.
- TANF funded assistance may not be provided for any medical care, regardless of whether the family members are covered by Medicaid. If assistance is provided for medical care it must be with MOE (Maintenance of Effort) funds and only for services that are not covered by Medicaid.
- As a general rule, TANF EA will not be used to assist citizens who live in Public Housing/Section 8 (their rent is already being subsidized by government assistance.) However, if there are special circumstances beyond the control of the family, which have consumed the family's income, the worker may use prudent judgment. (Ex. All of the available income was used to get the family's car repaired and the car is essential to their continued employment.) These situations should be rare and the worker may wish to staff the case with a supervisor.

VII. Services to Low Income Families

(under 200% of Poverty)

Catawba County will provide services to families with income at or below 200% of poverty when:

1. The family is a former Work First family,
2. The adult is working, and
3. The services provided would assist the adult to maintain employment, which will keep the family from reentering the traditional Work First Program.

The following services may be provided:

1. Short term housing
2. Child and Family Enrichment Activities
3. Transportation
4. Childcare
5. Parenting
6. Work-related expenses
7. Case management
8. Other appropriate services that can be funded by TANF and/or MOE that would prevent the family from losing employment and returning to Work First Family Assistance.

Eligibility for services will be determined per state policy:

1. Family's total gross monthly income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (accept family's statement, unless it is questionable)
2. Same definition of a family as used for current Work First participants
3. At least one child in the family must be under 18 and meet the same kinship and living with rules as current Work First families
4. Complete and maintain the eligibility worksheet

If appropriate, and if funds are available through the Work First/Employment Transportation Operating Assistance Program (DOT) the "families with children at or below 200% of poverty" will be referred for transportation assistance through the DOT funds.

All Work First citizens who are subject to the work requirements will be served before offering or providing the above listed services to "families with children at or below the 200% federal poverty level." Catawba County will ensure that all Work First citizens are served first through the organization of the Work First unit. In Catawba County, it is the responsibility of the Work First case manager to implement the entire Work First Program – cash assistance and employment. Therefore, from the moment the applicant presents her/himself for Work First, the focus is on helping the family meet their financial needs through employment and child support. On the day of application, the case manager begins to lay the foundation and ground rules for the program. The Mutual Responsibility Agreement is jointly developed and services are provided which will enhance the likelihood that the adult becomes employed and self-sufficient.

VIII. Services to Non-Custodial Parents

Catawba County will not offer services to non-custodial parents.

IX. Exemption from the Work Requirement

As funds and resources allow, Catawba County will begin to expand the Work Registration requirement to families with children under the age of one (S coded). In the general work force, the federal Family Medical Leave Act dictates individuals are to be allowed up to twelve weeks of paid/unpaid leave following the birth of a child. As funds and resources allow, Catawba County will expand its employment program to families with children under the age of one, to mirror this requirement of the Family Medical Leave Act.

Catawba County's plan will allow for flexibility to determine on a case-by-case basis how many hours and type of work activities individuals coded F and I should be engaged in (if any).

Therefore, individuals in Catawba County, coded F and I, will be granted an exemption from the work requirement. These individuals will develop a Mutual Responsibility Agreement with their case manager, which is appropriate for their situation – to include, further medical treatment, filing for disability, or appropriate activities leading to financial stability for the family.

X. Innovative County Strategies

Catawba County has historically demonstrated creative and highly effective collaborative efforts combining the skills and resources of multiple agencies and programs. The same is true of this effort. Several successful initiatives are currently in place to protect children and strengthen families. These projects include:

1. Legal Services for Child Only cases: Catawba County has a contract with Legal Aid of North Carolina to provide legal services to 'child only' Work First Family Assistance cases and if, applicable and appropriate, to 'regular' Work First Family Assistance cases to increase the family stability for the children. The legal services provided include:
 - Counsel and Advice
 - Preparation of documentations such as education affidavits, health care consent forms
 - Representation in custody, guardianship and adoption proceedings
2. Economic Literacy: Work First has partnered with Cooperative Extension to provide Economic Literacy classes to Work First participants as part of the Human Resource Development (Employability Skills Class) at Catawba Valley Community College. Topics covered are:
 - Identify values
 - Identify money goals
 - Develop a plan to achieve goals – making ends meet
 - Earned Income Tax Credit

Cooperative Extension has also provided Economic Literacy training for the Work First staff so that they maybe better equipped to assist the Work First customers one-on-one with economic/budgeting issues. Staff has developed a Budgeting Economic Literacy pamphlet that includes a worksheet that is used with the participants.

3. Tax Preparation and Earned Income Tax Credit: Since 2000, Catawba County has been utilizing a local tax preparer to assist Work First citizens with their taxes and in educating the Work First participant in regard to the Earned Income Tax Credit. JobLink, which Work First is a partner with, each year has invited the IRS to hold a session on Earned Income Tax Credit for customers of the JobLink and Work First.
4. The Faith Community: The Faith Community Task Force on Poverty in Catawba County was formed in 1996 and continues to meet regularly. The purpose of the Faith Community Task Force is 'to get involved in moving citizens off welfare into employment and productivity.' One of the most successful outcomes of this task force to date is the Work and Ride Program. The Work and Ride Program is a partnership of Catawba County Social Services, Greater Hickory Cooperative Christian Ministry, and the Faith Community Task Force on Poverty. The Work and Ride Program accepts vehicles that are road-worthy and matches them with families

in Catawba County who need transportation maintain employment. The Faith Community Task Force on Poverty along with Social Services sponsors “The Hidden Faces of Catawba County: The Working Poor” which is a guided tour of Catawba County. Housing conditions, immigrant population, access to health care, and transportation services are discussed. The purpose of the tour is to show that there are positive, concrete things that the community can do to help solve the issues they see and to personalize the issues in the community by taking the participants on strategically planned site visits.

5. Domestic Violence Services: Violence in the family maybe a substantial barrier to self-sufficiency for many families. Catawba County, recognizing the impact that violence can have on families, has entered into a contract with Family Guidance to provide an in-dept assessment. The purpose of the assessment is to evaluate the citizen’s situation and to determine services needed, as well as the extent to which the violence is an impediment to self-sufficiency. Family Guidance will provide the following services:
 - Individualized assessments for each citizen referred by the Work First case manager. Based on the assessment, the citizen may receive ongoing counseling, psychological testing, and/or support services
 - Case consultation with the Work First case manager
6. JobLink Career Center: Catawba County’s JobLink Career Center is located at Catawba Valley Community College East Campus. The center’s partners include:
 - New Choices (formerly known as Program for Displaced Homemakers)
 - Catawba County Social Services – Work First
 - Catawba Valley Community College
 - Employment Security Commission
 - Vocational Rehabilitation
 - Workforce Investment Act
 - Experience Works (formerly known as Green Thumb)

The services offered at the center include:

- Career Counseling
 - Career Testing/Assessment
 - Computer Software Tutorials
 - Job Referral and Listings
 - Labor Market Information
 - Referrals for supportive services
 - Resume Preparation
7. Services for families at or below 200% of poverty: Catawba County will provide services to families with income at or below 200% of poverty when:
 - The family is a former Work First family,
 - The adult is working, and

- The services provided will assist the adult in maintaining employment which will keep the family from reentering the traditional Work First Program.
8. Retention Services: Catawba County provides a one-time lump sum Employment Retention Bonus of \$400 to Work First participants whose Work First check terminates due to earned income and who remain employed:
- With the same employer, and
 - Full time (30+ hours per week) for four consecutive months following termination of their Work First cash benefit.
- The Employment Retention Bonus is given at the end of the fourth month. During the four months following termination of the participant's Work First check, the Work First case manager continues to provide follow-up counseling and appropriate supportive services. The goal is to provide successfully employed Work First families with an incentive and reward for changing their employment behavior.
9. Hispanic Outreach: This preventive program is designed to work intensively with Hispanic families struggling with self-sufficiency and child abuse/neglect risk factors. One bi-lingual employee carries a specialized caseload of families referred by Work First and Children's Services staff who determine that family risk factors are at a moderate to high level for Child Protection Services involvement. The specialist engages the families in discussion of voluntary opportunities available to them and presents a variety of settings in which to gain those opportunities. A tailored plan is developed that meets the specific needs of the individual family members, including support groups, therapeutic parenting groups, individual in-home training, childcare or adult care programs, video and CD Rom based programs, in addition to linkages to basic resources around health, education, and employment.

XI. Special Issues

Currently, Catawba County is facing a changing population and economy. Since 1990, the Asian population in Catawba County has grown by approximately 408%. Most Asian families are in the country legally, having immigrated to the United States after the war in Vietnam. Many say that the mountains and climate of the Piedmont remind them of their homelands. Most have found success in this area. Because of the social-structure of the clan, these immigrants remain a strong intact community of families.

As a rule, these families are highly motivated to work. However, because of their large families some remain eligible for Work First and other forms of assistance even when they are working full time. Many Asian families struggle with the language and cultural differences.

The spring of 2004 Catawba County learned about a federally planned Hmong Resettlement effort. 15,000 Hmong refugees are being moved out of a refugee camp in Thailand to the United States. Each of the families are being given the option to move to the home of friends/relatives in the United States. North Carolina is expecting a total of 350 individuals and Catawba County is expecting 147 individuals.

The Latino population increase in Catawba County since 1990 is approximately 756%. Again, this population is highly motivated to work. However, many Latino immigrants are not in the country legally.

Of growing concern is the increasing number of children in the Child Only caseload where the child is a US citizen, but the adults in the home are illegal aliens. Currently, there are 20 cases where the US born child of an illegal alien mother is receiving benefits. Because of the restrictions of the TANF program, these mothers are not subject to the work requirements or subject to the time limits. Staff continues to look for ways to strengthen these families.

The growing number of Asian and Latino immigrants to this area bring a unique mix of languages and cultures. The Work First unit currently has two bi-lingual staff (one Spanish and one Hmong.) With the increasing diversity, new issues and concerns are identified. Language and cultural differences can be employment barriers. The influx of Asian and Latino families has the potential to impact the number of families to be served by Benefit Diversion and to impact caseload growth. In addition, Federal immigration laws make it unclear how to best work with the US born child of illegal parents.

Catawba County's labor force in August was 73,370 with an unemployment rate of 6.7% and the State's rate was 5.0% (www.ncesc.com). During the last several years, Catawba County has seen a steady increase in layoffs and business closings. Catawba County historically has been characterized by its dependency on manufacturing. Fifty percent of those employed in the county have a connection to manufacturing with plants that produce much of the nation's furniture, textiles, and fiber optics. Many of these manufacturing plants have seen a slow down with the recession resulting in layoffs, shortened workweeks and plant closings. In the

past several years, many manufacturing jobs previously held by Catawba County citizens have gone to developing counties where employees at significantly lower wages can do the work. The lost of manufacturing jobs are being replaced with service jobs that pay less. The ranks of the 'working poor' in Catawba County are swelling. 9.1% of Catawba County citizens are living in poverty.

XII. Eligibility Criteria

Catawba County will follow criteria established and implemented by the State for the following:

1. Age limits for children
2. Definition of relationships
3. Who can apply/be included in the payment
4. Payment levels
5. Benefit calculation
6. Countable income
7. Sanctions
8. Resource requirements (limit and countable items)
9. Time limits and extensions
10. Rewards, exemptions, and exceptions to requirements
11. Benefit Diversion requirements

Any time accrued by a recipient on the State *Two Year Clock* will be carried forward if Catawba County becomes an Electing County. Sanctions will transfer from county to county. If an applicant/recipient moves to Catawba County from another Electing County, which has different sanctions than the state (Catawba County will follow the State's sanctions) Catawba County will count any sanction from the Electing county as a first sanction – therefore the next sanction imposed would be Pay after Performance.

Catawba County will maintain the linkage between Work First and Medicaid in which Work First eligibility will cause automatic Medicaid eligibility for everyone included in the Work First Family Assistance payment.

Catawba County proposes changes to the following policies. Unless otherwise noted, these changes will be implemented once the State and Catawba County's plan has been approved.

1. Job Quit Policy
2. Medical Initiative

All Catawba County policies will be supported by "prudent person" concept. The line staff are expected to follow policy, but are empowered to make decisions in the best interest of the citizen.

1. Job Quit Policy: All adults receiving Work First benefits/applying for Work First benefits are expected to:

- Actively seek employment
- Accept employment when it is offered
- Work the number of hours specified by their employer
- Maintain employment

(*This policy and its penalty will only be applied to individuals who have had the Job Quit Policy explained to them. The policy will be explained as soon as the plan has been approved by the state to all Work First applicants and at all reviews. For current cases, an explanation of the policy will be made at the next face to face contact with the recipient. When the policy is

explained, the client will be given a copy of the policy. The client will also sign a copy of the policy, which will be maintained in the case record as proof the participant has been told about the policy. At that moment, the participant/applicant will become subject to the policy and its penalty.)

The Job Quit Penalty will be applied to Work First applicants/recipients who have been informed about the policy and who:

- Voluntarily quit a job without good cause
- Refuse to accept a bonafide job offer without good cause
- Are dismissed for misconduct connected with their work or fired for excessive absenteeism without good cause.
- Who voluntarily request a reduction in hours without good cause or who work fewer than 40 hours per week when 40 hours of work are available.

If the individual quits a job without good cause a sanction will be applied to the Work First case. The sanction will follow the state's sanctions for non-compliance with the Mutual Responsibility Agreement.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| • First Sanction | 25% reduction of payment for three months |
| • Second Sanction (Subsequent) | Pay After Performance for a minimum of three months (must be in compliance with their MRA) |

Exemptions from the Job Quit Policy:

- Any adult who has not received an explanation and copy of the Job Quit Policy
- The adult resigns from a job at the demand of an employer
- The adult accepts a bonafide job offer for another job, comparable to the one, which was quit. (Comparable employment may be less hours or lower salary than the job, which was quit; however, to be considered comparable, the new job must provide some additional benefit or have the potential for advancement. For example – the new job may pay less, but provides health insurance. Or the new job may pay less, but be significantly closer to the home of the adult with limited transportation resources.)

Good Cause

- Discrimination by an employer based on age, race, sex, color, handicap, religious beliefs, national origin or political beliefs.
- Work demands or conditions that render continued employment unreasonable, such as not being paid on schedule.
- Circumstances beyond the adult's control. These include, but are not limited to serious illness or incapacity of the adult or another household member, which requires the presence of the adult (verification will be required.) Collapse of the family's transportation or childcare systems. The adult must show that they have attempted to locate alternative transportation/childcare. At a minimum, the family is to be in contact with Social Services to discuss alternative transportation/childcare options prior to refusing or quitting a job.)
- The job pays less than minimum wage.
- The degree of risk to health and safety is unreasonable.

- The adult is physically or mentally unfit to perform the employment (verified by medical evidence or by reliable information from other sources.)
 - Any other reason that a “a prudent person” would deem beyond the individual’s control or any employment situation that is deemed to be “unsuitable.”
2. Medical Initiative: Contingent upon cost and availability of a provider – The Work First application process will include an independent medical screening for all applicants/recipients that claim F (disabled and incapacitated individuals) as part of the eligibility criteria. The information obtained from the independent medical provider will help in assisting these families and staff in developing an appropriate Mutual Responsibility Agreement plan for either treatment, filing for social security disability, or employment. If the applicant refuses or fails to keep the scheduled appointment with the independent provider the Work First application will be denied and the case will be evaluated for Medicaid.

Screening must be done at the following times:

- Before the application is processed; and/or
- At any other time considered appropriate

On-going recipients who refuse or fail to be screened lose eligibility and the Work First Family Assistance case is terminated and the case must be evaluated for Medicaid. (This policy is similar to the required Substance Abuse Screening.)

If the individual fails, without good cause, to comply with the Mutual Responsibility Agreement developed based on the recommendations of the independent medical provider; a sanction will be applied to the Work First case. The sanction will follow the state’s sanctions for non-compliance with the Mutual Responsibility Agreement.

- First Sanction 25% reduction of payment for three months
- Second Sanction Pay After Performance for a minimum of three months
(Subsequent)

XIII. Community Service Programs

Catawba County chooses not to require parents or caretakers receiving assistance to participate in community services employment, but will utilize other state and federal acceptable activities in assisting the participant in becoming employed.

XIV. Appeals Process

Catawba County will have a two-tier appeals process that substantially complies with state law (G.S. 108A-79).

A line Supervisor in the Family Support Division who has not had any involvement with the family or the case will conduct the first tier of the hearing process. Unless the family requests an extension, this hearing must be held within five workdays of the request. A written statement of the decision must be served by certified mail to the appellant within five working days of the first tier hearing. The first-tier hearing follows all of the time frames and conditions of current policy.

If the family wishes to appeal the decision rendered by the first tier appeal, the family must notify Catawba County Social Services within 15 days of the date the initial decision was mailed to the appellant. The second tier hearing will take place within ten workdays and will be recorded. A Supervisor not attached to the Family Support Division, who has had no knowledge of or contact with the family, will conduct this hearing. The Hearing Officer will render his/her decision within 45 days.

Catawba County policy will differ from G.S. 108-A –79 in that the Hearing Officer who conducts the second tier hearing has only 45 days to render a decision and that decision will be considered final.

Any applicant/recipient who is dissatisfied with the final decision of the Department may file, within 30 days of receipt of notice of such decision, a petition for judicial review in Superior Court of Catawba County. Failure to file a petition within the time stated shall operate as a waiver of the right of such party to review.

XV. Review Prior to Expiration of Time Limits

Catawba County will continue to follow criteria established and implemented by the State for reviewing cases prior to the expiration of time limits. In addition to this supervisors will review and monitor weekly/monthly state reports regarding families time limits. Supervisors will continue to complete monthly staffings with the Work First case managers to review the time used by each participant and to discuss actions that are needed to be taken to empower the family to move towards self-sufficiency.

Each time a new Mutual Responsibility Agreement is developed, the Eligibility Tracking Update screen is reviewed, discussed, and signed by the case manager and participant to ensure that both parties are aware of the months left on the time clocks.

Catawba County's Success for Families at Risk plan is designed to formalize the strategies that are already in place and to strengthen existing collaborative efforts. The purpose of the initiative is to give priority to serving all Work First families who have received cash assistance for 30 or more months and Work First citizens who are incapacitated. These participants may also have other barrier to success such as physical disabilities, substance abuse, mental health issues, low IQ, low basic education skills, and little or no work history.

Currently, Catawba County has 34 Work First families that fit the target group for the Success Initiative and all 34 families are receiving intensive employment services. The current Team Members of the Success Initiative include:

- Employment Security Commission Job Placement Counselor
- Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor
- Qualified Substance Abuse Professional
- Work First Case Manager
- Faith Community Coordinator
- Work First Supervisor
- Child Welfare Staff (if appropriate)
- Work First Family

The Success Team meets as needed to review progress and to revise plans, if necessary. The Success Team develops a plan that draws upon the resources identified and maximizes the potential of the family achieving self-sufficiency.

XVI. Funding Requirements

Electing County Funding Requirements

The following activities, staff, and services will be funded using Maintenance of Effort (MOE) funds:

1. Work First Staff
2. TANF Fraud Investigative Staff
3. Work First Participant Expenses
4. Work First Child/Adult Care
5. Work First Transportation Expenses
6. Work First Education/Training
7. Retention Services
8. Enrichment Services
9. Group Support
10. Contracts (Cognitive Skills Training, Legal Aid, and Job Recruitment/Assistance)
11. Work First Cash – Emergency Assistance
12. Others as needed

Amount of Work First Block Grant earmarked for Child Welfare Services is 50% in both fiscal years (FY 2005-06 and FY 2006-07).

Amount of the county block grant designated for Work First Diversion Assistance, Work First Family Assistance, Work First Services and the Maintenance of Effort contribution:

| | <u>FY 2005-06</u> | <u>FY 2006-07</u> |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Child Welfare Services | \$1,597,042 | \$1,597,042 |
| TANF CPS/FS Adoption | <u>\$ 87,083</u> | <u>\$ 87,083</u> |
| Total WFBG for Children | \$1,684,125 | \$1,684,125 |
| TANF Domestic Violence | \$ 20,130 | \$ 20,130 |
| Day Care Administration | \$ 50,000 | \$ 50,000 |
| WF Family Assistance | \$1,297,175 | \$1,297,175 |
| WF Benefit Diversion | <u>\$ 302,750</u> | <u>\$ 302,750</u> |
| Total WFBG for Families | \$1,670,055 | \$1,670,055 |
| Grand Total – WFBG | \$3,354,180 | \$3,354,180 |
| Maintenance of Effort | \$1,708,829 | \$1,708,829 |

Catawba County will lower the Maintenance of Effort by 10% or \$189,869 (from \$1,898,698 to \$1,708,829). The \$189,869 reduction in MOE will be used in Child Welfare Services.

XVII. Certification

As Chairman of the Catawba County Board of Commissioners, I hereby certify that during each fiscal year to which this plan is applicable:

This program will be known as the Catawba County Work First Program;

The provision described in this plan will be carried out in accordance with state and federal law;

This plan was developed based upon recommendations of the Planning Committee, current Work First participants, Work First staff, and citizens of Catawba County.

I also certify that:

The citizens of Catawba County have been given an opportunity to review this plan.

The Catawba County Board of County Commissioners has approved this plan and is the entity responsible for the Catawba County Work First Program.

Katherine W. Barnes, Chair
Catawba County Board of Commissioners